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ABSTRACT

Research shows that subjective indices of social integration are related to general well-being. In order to study the relationship between social interaction and well-being, 31 healthy Caucasian adults, with a mean age of 73 years, were given two questionnaires. The first contained eleven subjective social interaction variables and was derived from the Pattison Psychosocial Support Inventory. The second, Flanagan's Life Satisfaction Inventory, measured general well-being by having subjects rate levels of satisfaction and importance for each of 15 different life aspects. An overall Importance, an overall Satisfaction, and an overall (Importance x Satisfaction) Quality of Life Score was computed. None of the subjective social support variables was significantly related to overall Satisfaction, a measure comparable to more traditional life satisfaction measures. However, these variables did account for 60% of the variance in Quality of Life. These results, which are inconsistent with the findings of other researchers, may be linked to the fact that the relative salience of life aspects for these respondents was considered. (Author/BH)

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Subjective Social Support Indices and Their Relationship to
Quality of Life of Older Adults

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Abstract

Subjective indices of social integration have been found to relate to general well-being. The present exploratory study examined the relationship among several subjective measures of social support and quality of life in a sample of healthy, well-functioning elderly persons. Eleven subjective social interaction variables were derived from the Pattison Psychosocial Support Inventory. General well-being was measured by Flanagan's Life Satisfaction Inventory. For each of 15 different life aspects respondents rated level of satisfaction and importance. An overall Importance, an overall Satisfaction and an overall (Importance X Satisfaction) Quality of Life score were computed. None of the subjective social support variables were significantly related to simple overall satisfaction, a measure comparable to more traditional life satisfaction measures. However, they did account for 60% of the variance in Quality of Life. The magnitude of these results, which are inconsistent with previous researchers who have only found weak relationships between social interaction and well-being, is discussed with respect to the importance of considering the relative salience of life aspects for respondents.

Subjective Social Support Indices and Their Relationship to
Quality of Life of Older Adults

The notion that formal and informal relationships are important to the health and well-being of individuals has long been recognized. Social gerontologists have increasingly been interested in the ways in which interpersonal ties contribute to an individual's sense of well-being (Larson, 1978). Global constructs such as social relationships and general well-being have also been undergoing significant refinement and specification (George, 1980; Antonucci, 1983). Recently a distinction has been made between more "objective" measures of social interaction and a "subjective", or uniquely individual perspective. Researchers are acknowledging the individual's subjective view of his/her network and the importance of taking into account the meaning of relationships and the strength of affectional ties. Lowenthal and Robinson (1976) write that in addition to studying the degree of interaction, we need to examine "a subjective or involvement dimension as well."

Liang, Dvorkin, Kahana & Mazian (1980), reviewing the empirical literature on social integration and morale, concluded that the relationship between these two constructs was far from conclusive. Following Lowenthal & Robinson (1976), they postulated that social integration must be examined not only in traditional objective terms such as network size or amount of interaction, but also in more subjective or qualitative terms such as perceived sense of involvement or feelings of loneliness. Hypothesizing the importance

of subjective assessments of social interaction is in line with other researchers (Conner, Powers & Bultena, 1979; Lemon, Bengtson & Peterson, 1972) who have suggested that it is the quality and not the quantity of interaction that is more closely related to life satisfaction.

Liang et al. did indeed find that objective social integration had only an indirect impact on well-being and that this impact was mediated by subjective feelings of social interaction. Schooler, Pastorello, Comen & Clark, (1981), however, when attempting to replicate Liang et al.'s findings, gave primacy to objective integration and reported that objective and subjective integration were best viewed as working independently of each other to affect morale. While both Liang et al. and Schooler et al. used only single composite measures of "objective" and "subjective" social integration, Ward, Sherman & LaGory, (1984) provided more detailed indicators of subjective and objective social integration. They employed eight separate objective measures and four different subjective measures. The subjective measures revolved around sufficiency aspects, i.e., Do you see your children as often as you like? Although their analyses revealed that, indeed, the subjective network assessments were more strongly related to well-being, these variables in combination only explained 6% of the variance in morale. Together, objective and subjective measures only explained 8% of the variance. As Ward et al. states, the magnitude of these coefficients is comparable to the findings of similar researchers

(Conner et al., 1979; Larson, 1978; Liang et al., 1980) and is likely attributable to the ways in which social integration and general well-being have been operationalized.

The purpose of the research reported here was to examine how indices of social interaction and support which are entirely "subjective" relate to general well-being. The Pattison Psychosocial Kinship Inventory (Pattison, DeFrancisco, Wood, Frasier & Crowder, 1975) was originally developed for clinicians to use in their efforts to delineate the nature of an individual's psychosocial system. Respondents are asked to list any and all persons who "are important in your life now." In contrast to more traditional ways of measuring social networks, no effort was made to determine if, indeed, all relatives were listed. In addition, no apriori categorization schemes were offered. Previous research into the social networks of individuals may have unwittingly restricted person's responses by requesting them to list "kin, friends and/or neighbors." Such a request may preclude other types of relationships from being mentioned which may not initially be conceptualized in this manner, i.e., one's minister, the apartment manager whose actions significantly affect one, a long-standing family doctor, etc. Such persons may or may not be conceptualized as "friends" or "neighbors". Avoiding "classes" of people and requesting a list of any and all persons who "are important", the Pattison inventory results in a very individualized and personal description of one's social network. Each of the persons listed is

related to the respondent on the basis of subjectively valued importance.

In addition to information on the sex, type of relationships and number of years known, respondents also rate each person listed on the following: a) the kind of feelings he/she has towards this person, b) the extent of emotional support that could be obtained from this person, c) how frequently contact (face-to-face, phone or letter) occurs, d) the respondent's perception of the kind of feelings (how positive or negative) the listed person has towards the respondent, e) the respondent's perception of how strong the listed person feels towards the respondent. Respondents also drew a sociogram of the social connectedness that exists among all the network members. From this sociogram, a measure of network density was derived by calculating the proportion of network members who interact with each other to the proportion who do not. A measure of reciprocity was obtained by calculating the congruence between the feelings respondents have for each network member and the feelings they perceive these network members have for them. Other derived scores included the percentage of kin and percent of network members who were of the opposite sex.

The consistent but rather weak relationship between social interaction and general well-being discussed above may also be partially attributable to the manner in which well-being has been conceptualized and measured. The global concept of general well-being has often been reformulated in terms of life

satisfaction, happiness, and morale. George & Bearon (1980) provide a detailed discussion of the conceptual differences among these measures of general well-being. Previous researchers (Conner et al., 1979; Liang et al., 1980; Ward et al. 1984) have employed global measures of morale in their investigation of well-being and social interaction. Although domain specific measures of satisfaction are preferable to global measures, the frames of reference used by subjects to determine their self-assessments differ widely across individuals and have seldomly been addressed by researchers (George & Bearon, 1980). The research reported here attempts to overcome this difficulty by employing a measure of life satisfaction which does take into account the salience of specific life domains to respondents.

As a measure of well-being, Flanagan's (1978) Life Satisfaction Inventory was used. Flanagan conducted critical incident interviews with 2,834 50 - 70 year old men and women from which he culled 15 aspects of life that were significant in determining adult life satisfaction. He subsequently obtained information on how important each aspect of life was and how well satisfied each individual was with that life aspect. It remained for Carter (1984) and Norris and Carter (1984) to develop a Quality of Life score which reflects both the importance and satisfaction an individual experiences. In this case, the rated satisfaction of each aspect (1=not at all satisfied to 5=very well satisfied) is multiplied by the correspondingly rated importance (1=not at all important to 5=very important). The

resulting sum of these 15 products is the overall Quality of Life score for an individual. The 15 aspects of life represented in the Life Satisfaction Inventory are material comforts, health and personal safety, relationships with relatives, having and raising children, close personal relationship with spouse, close friends, helping and encouraging others, participation in government, learning, understanding yourself, work, expressing yourself in a creative manner, socializing, passive recreation and participation in active recreation.

Through the use of a very individually oriented or subjective measure of social interaction and a measure of general well-being which is tied to specific life domains and provides for differences in the salience of these life domains, it was hypothesized that a stronger relationship between social interaction and general well being would emerge.

Research Participants

Elderly participants were originally recruited for a study designed to develop a model of effective functioning in older adults. (Norris, Seeman, Compton, Adkins & Leftwich, 1983). Participants were recruited from the local community and from a high-rise apartment complex for the elderly. Only those individuals who reported no major physical problems were included in the study. The sample consisted of 31 persons, seven men and 24 women, all white, with a mean age of 73 years. Participants, in addition to reporting a high level of physical health, were consistently highly

educated, averaging 15.67 years of schooling and economically well-off as reflected in the medium income of \$16,875 per year. With respect to marital status, 13% had never married, 35% were married and living with their spouse, 39% were widowed and 13% were divorced.

Results

Initial analyses were conducted on the 11 social interaction variables. Pearson product moment correlations were computed and the matrix of these correlations revealed several significant relationships. As can be seen from Table 1, network size was inversely related to network density.

Insert Table 1 about here

The size of respondents' networks, which averaged 12 persons, varied considerably, ranging from 4 to 35 persons. More dense networks were characterized by a higher percentage of kin membership. On the average, respondents' networks included 55% kin and 45% others. The average number of years respondents indicated they had known network members was 35 years. Respondents' ratings of how they felt towards network members was highly correlated both with the kind and the strength of feelings they perceived others felt towards them. Older participants had denser networks and were more likely to perceive others as having stronger and more positive feelings towards them.

More highly educated persons tended to have networks that were less dense. Respondents living in the age-segregated apartment complex and those residing in the general community had networks that were not significantly different from each other in any aspect.

Frequency of contact with network members was positively related to both perceived strength of network members' feelings toward the respondent and the extent to which respondents felt they could receive emotional support from the listed person. Frequency of contact was inversely related to the percentage of persons of the opposite sex.

Turning to general well-being as measured by the Flanagan scale, three separate overall scores were obtained; the total Importance, the total Satisfaction and the total of the weighted (Importance X Satisfaction) Quality of Life score. Overall Importance and overall Satisfaction scores were not significantly related ($r=.30$). None of the basic demographic characteristics of the sample (age, sex, income, level of education or place of residence) was significantly correlated with any of the three Flanagan measures, indicating that our sample could be considered very homogeneous with respect to well-being.

Investigating the nature of the relationship between these indices of social interaction and these measures of general well being, several analyses were conducted. Correlations between each of the social support variables and the overall Importance, overall Satisfaction and the overall weighted Quality of Life score are also

shown in Table 1. The Importance score can be regarded as a measure of an individual's investment in life. Persons who are invested in life, who value many aspects of life, maintain a high degree of contact with network members and perceive themselves as receiving significant emotional support from those network members. Being invested in many areas of life is also reflected in the relative looseness of their networks. As opposed to persons with denser networks, where a great majority of network members interact among themselves, persons who seem to be highly invested in life have a wider variety of individuals who are important to them and who do not necessarily know or have contact with each other. The overall Satisfaction score, which can be considered comparable to more traditional measures of life satisfaction, was significantly related to only frequency of contact. When augmented by the rated importance of each life aspect, thereby giving rise to the overall Quality of Life score, social support variables are again more related. Respondents with higher Quality of Life scores, who reported a more fulfilling life, saw or otherwise had contact with the members in their network more often, perceived others as feeling strongly towards them and felt able to obtain emotional support from their network members.

Pearson product moment correlations were also computed between each of the indices of social support and the 15 separate life domains. Here again, the pattern of correlations varied considerably depending upon whether one examined only reported

levels of Importance, levels of Satisfaction, or the weighted Quality of Life score. The importance one ascribes to various life aspects was again related to network density and emotional support. Seven of the 15 life aspects were negatively correlated with density while four other life aspects were positively related to perceived emotional support. For the Satisfaction scores, frequency of contact was again the only social interaction variable that was significantly related. Correlation of the Satisfaction scores for the six life aspects associated with frequency of contact were between .36 and .50. Extent of emotional support was not related to Satisfaction scores for any life aspect. The weighted Quality of Life scores for each life aspect reflected in part the patterns that characterized both the Importance and Satisfaction scores.

Frequency of contact was most prominent, correlating with six life aspects ($r=.39$ to $r=.60$). However, perceived emotional support, which was significantly associated with three aspects of life, was also present. In general, network size, number of years respondents have known network members, the kind of feelings they have towards others and the kind of feelings they perceive others have toward them, were not related to any life aspect, regardless of the scoring method.

Further exploration of the relationship between social interaction and general well-being was conducted through the use of multiple regression analysis. Two of the 11 social interaction variables were dropped (percentage of reciprocal relationships and

number of years network members have been known) as neither was significantly related to any of the other social variables nor to the three well-being measures. Standard multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the contribution of the remaining nine social variables to the overall Importance score, the overall Satisfaction score and the overall Quality of Life score. For both the Importance and the Satisfaction scores, nonsignificant F-values were obtained. The types of social interaction as measured by the Pattison were significant predictors, however, of the overall Quality of Life score. Together these social interaction variables accounted for 60.06% of the variance ($F=3.51$, $p<.01$). Frequency of contact was the single most effective predictor, accounting for 24% of the variance, followed by percentage of opposite sex and perceived strength of feelings others have towards one.

Discussion

The strong relationship that people have often assumed to exist between social integration and general well-being appears to have been realized in this study. Sixty percent of the variance in quality of life appears to have been accounted for by several subjective measures of social interaction. In light of previous research which has consistently found a significantly weaker relationship between these concepts, however, the findings of this study seem somewhat surprising (Okum, Stock, Haring & Witter, 1984). In order to explain such incongruous results one can look at the study's methodology and/or at the conceptualization of the major

variables.

Methodologically, the study presented here has several shortcomings. With respect to the use of multivariate analyses, the sample size ($n=31$) was rather small and the ratio of predictor variables to criterion measures was relatively unfavorable. Insofar as this investigation was considered exploratory in nature, these criticisms are less serious, although valid. With the addition of substantially more research participants and the same set of measures, it is expected that the magnitude of our present findings may diminish to some extent, but that a significant difference between our results and those of previous researchers will still remain.

Attempting to understand the results of this study, one can look to the manner in which social integration and general well-being were conceptualized and measured. Researchers interested in general well-being have long recognized the fact that although such objective indices of the "good life", i.e., health, adequate income, proximity of living relatives, etc. do contribute in general to a person's assessment of his/her life, it is the subjective appraisal of life aspects that is central. In fact, as George & Bearon (1980) describe it, the most crucial subjective assessment of life quality is an individual's relative satisfaction with life in general. Most morale, adjustment and/or life satisfaction measures attempt to tap this general quality or meaning of the life experience, but fail to take into account how widely respondents may

vary in the salience or weight that they ascribe to differing life aspects. It is precisely this emphasis on the importance an individual ascribes to a life domain, coupled with a satisfaction rating, that makes the Flanagan Quality of Life score so valuable. While the subjective social interaction variables developed in this study did not account for any statistically significant proportion of the variance in the simple overall Satisfaction score, which is comparable to other more traditional measures of life satisfaction, these results are more consistent with those of other researchers who have consistently found a rather weak relationship between social interaction and well-being. It was only through the use of the more sophisticated Quality of Life measure that a statistically strong and meaningful relationship between subjective social integration and perceived well-being emerges. Both the power and the usefulness of the Quality of Life concept as measured by the Flanagan and such social interaction measures as those developed from the Pattison, which are firmly ensconced in a subjective framework, need to be explored further.

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Table 1

Table of Intercorrelations

Social Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		1	2	3	M	SD
1 Network Size	1.00	-.16	-.23	-.16	-.16	.26	-.08	.01	.11	.10	-.39		.29	.17	.24	12.26	6.46
2 % Reciprocal		1.00	-.06	-.05	-.23	.09	.24	.26	.30	.12	.16		.15	-.01	.11	38.63	20.93
3 Number of Years			1.00	.30	-.10	.19	.25	-.07	-.32	.00	.10		.05	.08	.11	34.36	8.45
4 % Kin				1.00	.34	.16	-.22	-.26	.15	.14	.60		-.29	-.02	-.18	55.74	20.74
5 % Opposite Sex					1.00	.05	-.14	-.35	-.07	-.12	.17		-.05	.04	-.02	34.07	15.41
6 Kind of Feelings Towards Others						1.00	.05	-.03	.70	.38	.09		.02	-.20	-.16	4.03	.66
7 Extent Emotional Support							1.00	.36	.03	.26	-.11		.42	.18	.38	3.49	.74
8 Frequency of Contact								1.00	.30	.41	-.13		.38	.49	.59	3.30	.61
9 Others' Feelings Towards You									1.00	.60	.19		.04	.01	.00	3.91	.70
10 Strength Others' Feelings Towards You										1.00	.18		.29	.25	.35	3.87	.53
11 Density											1.00		-.39	-.18	-.27	.38	.22

Well-being Variables

1 Overall Importance													1.00	.30	.76	58.97	6.80
2 Overall Satisfaction														1.00	.83	57.45	7.90
3 Overall Quality of Life															1.00	229.19	45.09